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ABSTRACT

Jersey City State College (New Jersey) has assumed, as its primary mission, the challenge to address urban concerns, including urban teacher preparation. The revamped Junior Field Experience Program (JFE) is a required course for all prospective teachers. This requirement intends to prepare prospective teachers to deal with cultural diversity by becoming familiar with students and conditions in urban schools, and it encourages students to consider urban teaching as a career option. Prospective teachers examine the pedagogical, social, and political issues that are raised when an abstract commitment to treating all students respectfully is placed in the context of the urban school. All JFE students observe urban elementary and secondary schools in the one semester course and are assigned to a cooperating teacher for 6 weeks, in areas of certification, for a full day each week. Students keep journals in which to reflect on what has been learned about teaching and learning, and seminars are conducted to encourage students to share experiences, to learn from one another, and critically to examine what has been observed. Evaluations indicate that early field experience in urban schools diminishes stereotypes and fear, while energizing and challenging students with new insights about themselves. (LL)

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# EFFECTS OF USING EARLY PRE-SERVICE FIELD EXPERIENCES IN URBAN SETTINGS TO PREPARE TEACHERS TO MEET THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING IN MULTICULTURAL URBAN SCHOOLS

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# EFFECTS OF USING EARLY PRE-SERVICE FIELD EXPERIENCES IN URBAN SETTINGS TO PREPARE TEACHERS TO MEET THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING IN MULTICULTURAL URBAN SCHOOLS

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Although many of the conditions which characterize inner city schools, including racial and ethnic diversity, have rippled to the suburbs which encircle metropolitan areas, urban classrooms remain those most pressed to accommodate cultural diversity (Borman and Spring, 1984). Urban schools contain a smaller proportion of white, native speakers of English than they did thirty years ago when the civil rights movement challenged de jure segregation, an important fact often ignored in discussion of multicultural education. However, due to altered immigration requirements and political and economic changes internationally, large numbers of students from cultures not previously represented in the nation's school population are now served by urban schools. Indeed, with the exception of the African Americans, who comprise a sizable minority or a majority in most urban school systems, the cultural composition of the urban student population varies enormously from one urban school system to another, and in many cities, from one neighborhood school to another. Thus urban teachers, perhaps more than any other group of educators, must be prepared to deal successfully with cultural diversity in their classrooms (Grant, 1989; Weiner, 1991).

Although urban schools and teachers need to serve the most culturally diverse student population, urban school systems seem

to be the most inflexible in accommodating to differences of any sort, including students' learning styles, family cultures, and teacher strengths or weaknesses, as Comer has noted (1980). Urban school systems are resistant to accommodating to individual or group differences because they were structured to prohibit any deviation from highly regulated curricula and procedures. At their formation at the turn of the century, urban school systems adopted standard procedures and uniform performance measure as a means to insure impartiality and fairness in the treatment of the many immigrant groups served by the schools (Kaestle, 1973). Ironically, students who for any reason do not readily adapt to the behavioral or instructional norms dictated by the highly regulated, inflexible curricula and regulations fail to succeed academically.

Over twenty years ago, members of the Task Force of the National Institute for Advanced Study in Teaching Disadvantaged Youth concluded that all teachers need to be able to deal with students as human beings, to be able to share knowledge and experience, to be trustworthy, to be able to communicate, and to understand their students' world (Smith, et.al., 1969). Those goals certainly hold true for teacher preparation today, in educating teachers for a diverse student population. However, an additional demand is made of urban teacher preparation: to educate teachers who can deal with students as individuals and human beings in settings which often depersonalize learning and undercut ideals about attending to each child's needs.

Although urban teachers must be prepared to confront the greatest diversity of student needs, under conditions which severely limit individualization, few teacher preparation programs

acknowledge the special issues raised in urban teacher education. (Grant, 1989; Haberman, 1987, 1988).

In revamping its teacher preparation program, educators at Jersey City State College decided that the best way to prepare all prospective teachers to deal with cultural diversity was to insist that they become familiar with the students and conditions in urban schools. Hence, all students who are certified in the teacher education program conducted by the Department of Administration Curriculum, and Instruction, must enroll in a redesigned Junior Field Experience program (JFE), implemented in 1990-1991.

Jersey City State College has assumed, as its primary mission, addressing urban concerns including urban teacher preparation. However, many of the students who enroll in the undergraduate education program are young, white females, educated in ethnically homogeneous parochial schools or suburban public schools. Several students have requested placement in schools in other communities to avoid going into urban schools and the neighborhoods they serve, but the Department has a firm commitment to JFE's urban emphasis and will not alter placements. The requirement that all prospective teachers have an early field experience in urban schools is intended to insure that no teacher proceeds in the certification sequence without demonstrating the willingness and ability to work with students from a variety of cultures. Another objective of the course is to encourage students to consider urban teaching as a career option. Finally, the requirement is designed to give all program graduates an understanding of the difficulties teachers may confront in trying to deal with differences among students and between students and

teacher when school organization, procedures, and policies impede this.

The JFE attempts to prod prospective teachers to examine the pedagogical, social and political issues that are raised when an abstract commitment to treating all students respectfully is placed in the specific context of the urban school. All JFE students observe both urban secondary and elementary schools and students, so that classroom concerns are placed in the larger setting of the school, the school system, and the society. Students in the practicum are required to observe and analyze how urban teachers do and don't, can and can't become knowledgeable and caring about their students' needs, including those arising from ethnic, racial, religious, and national differences.

## THE JUNIOR FIELD EXPERIENCE

Throughout the certification sequence, starting with the introductory course "The Education Challenge," the teacher preparation program at Jersey City State College emphasizes the teacher's responsibility to adapt to student differences, as well as the special issues involved in urban education. This course includes a Community Study through which students gain some first hand background information about urban schools before their first hands-on experience in the JFE.

JFE is a semester course divided into three modules. In the first module which lasts three weeks, all students, regardless of their area of certification, spend one full day per week in an elementary school in one of three neighboring urban districts: Newark, West New York, or Jersey City. The first day is spent interviewing key administrators and touring the building. The

second and third days are used for classroom observation. To enable them to compare teaching styles, JFE students visit at least two classes each day; they observe different grade levels and at least one special education class. In arranging for these visits, the college coordinator encourages school administrators to include other experiences which may be unique to that school.

During the second module, JFE students are placed in an urban high school in the same district and follow the same format as in the first module. For both modules, faculty have developed learning guides to assist students in first collecting and analyzing information about school organization and classroom practices, then reflecting on their conclusions. For example, JFE participants examine what they have observed in the two classrooms from the point of view of both student and teacher. What would they want changed if they were the students? What would they do differently as the teacher? How are differences in learning styles accommodated? Students also analyze how school structures and procedures affect teacher and student performance. How do curriculum mandates influence the teacher's ability to adapt lessons to students' interests and needs? What do they observe about standardized testing's effects on the teacher and the student?

In the third module, which lasts six weeks, JFE students are assigned to a cooperating teacher in their area of certification for a full day each week. Responsibilities vary according to the desires of each party, but JFE students are expected to work directly with students in some capacity and may also assist the teacher with classroom responsibilities. In place of learning guides with specific questions, students keep journals in which

they reflect on what they have learned, about teaching, learning and themselves.

Each module concludes with a seminar in which faculty supervisors encourage students to share their experiences, learn from each other, and examine critically what they have observed. Faculty supervisors visit the schools during each module and observe JFE students in their work with children in the final module, but the key factor in the college/school site collaboration is the intensive work completed by the office of Professional Laboratory Experience at the College before the semester starts. Enough site schools have been involved so that the number of JFE students in each school is manageable, and each site is visited prior to each module. Regular meetings are held with the course coordinator, Laboratory Experience director, and school site personnel to discuss administrative details and review learning objectives for the module. When school personnel understand the course objectives and requirements thoroughly, they are able to help structure the experience so that JFE students gain the most from that particular site.

Students receive one credit for the course and are given a letter grade based on the quality of written assignments, participation in the seminar, and an evaluation completed by the cooperating teacher which stresses the student's ability to deal respectfully and empathetically with <u>all</u> learners. Students must receive at least a "C" in the cooperating teacher's evaluation in order to pass the course, regardless of the quality of their work in fulfilling the other requirements.

## EVALUATING WHAT WORKED - AND WHAT DIDN'T

Working with the director of the office of Professional Laboratory Experience, the four faculty members teaching the course in Fall 1990 used student suggestions and analysis of student work to revise the learning guides in time for the Spring 1991 course. In addition, one high school site was changed because of student and faculty dissatisfaction about the experience JFE participants were given. Hence, students enrolled in JFE in the second semester, Spring 1991, had a slightly different, improved experience.

In May 1991, three different evaluation strategies were used: first, all Spring 1991 JFE students evaluated the course anonymously, comparing their experience to the College's stated objectives for the class. Second, in anonymous written evaluations and in seminar discussions, Spring 1991 JFE students further examined how their attitudes toward teaching, urban schools, and urban students had changed. Third, students nearing completion of their senior student teaching who had been enrolled in the JFE in Fall 1990 completed anonymous written evaluations to assess how various aspects of JFE changed their beliefs about teaching, urban schools, and urban students.

As is true in most early field experiences, JFE had its greatest impact in helping students make decisions about their entry into the teaching profession. In terms of the goals related to urban schooling, the course helped the prospective teachers understand how urban schools operate and how school conditions affect both teachers and students. Perhaps most importantly, many JFE students experienced significant changes in the way they

viewed the problems and challenges of teaching in an urban school. Many lost their fear of urban schools and students and acquired a new respect for the work of urban teachers and their students.

"I had preconceived notions about students and I was afraid of what I would encounter..." one Spring 1991 JFE student noted. Another commented that she had "heard so many 'horror stories' about inner-city schools, those stories about teachers being stabbed, I probably wouldn't have considered an urban school if I had not experienced it." Several students explained that they had "always attended private schools and learned to fear urban schools." Although 27 of 36 respondents said that before JFE they would have considered teaching in an urban public school, their comments about fearing crime, violence, and discipline problems in urban schools may well indicate a halo effect and suggest, in fact, that few considered urban teaching seriously as a career option.

This interpretation is reinforced by responses to another question about how JFE changed their attitudes toward taking a teaching job in an urban school. Six per cent felt the experience had reinforced their commitment to avoid urban teaching; 17 per cent acknowledged that previous to JFE, they would not have considered an urban job but now felt "kids are kids" and "I have decided I could handle teaching in an urban school and I'll just learn how." All other respondents reported that they now realize how great the need is for dedicated, caring urban teachers -- and how much preparation it takes to become a skillful teacher in an urban classroom; how much they have to learn

One of the most dramatic shifts in JFE students' attitudes occurred in their ideas about students in urban public schools.

Typical of their responses were these:

> "I assumed that all students in an urban public school were destructive, just a bunch of street kids, nasty, rude. However, they are not like that at all. They are just as dedicated as any other child."
>
> "I thought they would be rough and uncooperative, but they were just the opposite. They were friendly and very helpful to me."
>
> "JFE prepared me to be more understanding of students with different cultural and educational needs."
>
> "JFE has given me a rich experience with respect to cultural difference"

JFE students also reported that they had been educated about the enormous obstacles some students in urban schools face, including a lack of self-esteem, difficulties with mastering English when it is a language different from the one spoken at home, and problems with family finances. Many JFE students admitted they had stereotypical negative views of students and urban public schools before the experience but had reevaluated their opinions, and now viewed urban students quite differently . With the exception of 2 students enrolled in the course in Spring 1991, everyone became more positive about his/her ability to work in an urban setting and his/her willingness to try to meet the challenge. They felt they had gained an empathy, respect, and understanding of the students in urban public schools and found ways to relate to them as individuals. Learning that "kids are kids" was a common accomplishment cited in the evaluation.

In responding to questions of how the course could be improved to further meet their needs, one of the changes proposed by students was to shorten the time spent in areas other than their certification specialization such as, Early Childhood,

Elementary, Secondary. Several students, with a high commitment to the elementary grades, wanted more time in this area and less in the high school. In addition, some students wanted a more concentrated, intense experience rather than the one-day-a-week schedule. To address the first concern, faculty are discussing methods of making the second module in the high schools more engaging and of explaining why teachers must be knowledgeable about the continuum of education, of what happens to students before and after they reach one's grade level. JFE participants were particularly struck by the anonymity in the urban high schools -- for themselves as well as for the students attending the school. That observation may be reflected in their dissatisfaction with the second module. A more concentrated experience may be more valuable, as they suggest, and faculty are exploring alternative methods of scheduling JFE.

All three evaluation methods indicated that early field experience in urban schools is a powerful door to diminish stereotypes and fear, as well as to energize and challenge students with new insights about themselves. These two outcomes are essential in preparing teachers who will resist pressures to adopt custodial attitudes and practices in dealing with students whose cultural background may be different from their own. Prospective teachers should be given the opportunity to overcome their fears about working with students who are different from them before they are called on to exercise authority in the classroom (Weiner, 1990). As the Junior Field experience at Jersey City State College demonstrates, an early, carefully planned field experience in selected urban schools is one way to prepare educators who can teach a diverse student population in

urban schools, or anywhere else.

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